Potato Growers of Idaho (PGI)

P.O. Box 949
Blackfoot, Idaho 83221
(208) 785-1110
www.potatogrowersofidaho.com

Salmon Recovery Position Statement
7 March, 2000

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Salmon Hearings Statement
7 March, 2000
PGI President Keith Esplin

The producers of Idaho's most famous commodity, the Idaho potato, support solutions that will lead to the recovery of the state's salmon runs. However, the Potato Growers of Idaho do not believe dam breaching and continued flow augmentation are viable alternatives. Therefore, the Potato Growers of Idaho oppose alternative 4, dam breaching and support alternative 3 – major system improvements.

In 1999, Idaho potato growers produced approximately 138 million-hundredweight of potatoes on approximately 400,000 acres. This production represents 30 percent of all potato production in the nation. By comparison, Idaho has a larger potato acreage base with higher production than all of Canada. Consumers worldwide recognize the Idaho potato as the safest, highest quality available by paying a premium in the marketplace. A large shipping and processing industry has been created around this production to create a value-added product that creates jobs and helps build Idaho's economy.

The Potato Growers of Idaho have a strong commitment to irrigated agriculture. Inaccurate and misleading assertions that portray dam breaching and flow augmentation as potential solutions to the salmon problem threaten not only Idaho's economy, but also the livelihoods of all Idaho farm families and the people who process and distribute our products, as well as those who supply inputs for our farms.

Mandated flow augmentation continues to be unrealistic and without scientific basis. Idaho has supplied more than 10 million-acre feet of water in the past five years and it has resulted in no measurable benefit to salmon.

Taking an additional million acre-feet of Idaho water will dry up 600,000 acres of productive farmland.

As many as 400,000 of the acres to be dried up, or the equivalent of Idaho's entire potato industry, will be high value, irrigation-intensive crops – mainly potatoes and sugarbeets. This scenario will bankrupt many farms and trigger over production of already-surplus grains, which utilize mainly early-season stream flows. Potato production returns about $1,600 per acre while other crops like grains return much less.

Taking an additional million acre-feet of Idaho water means that many of Idaho's reservoirs in dry years, would be empty up to 10 percent of the time. Tearing out dams will also result in an increase in power costs. Breaching these four dams could result in a 12 to 13 percent increase of wholesale power rates, a backbreaking blow to economically-strapped growers.

Dam breaching is a drastic option. There is no empirical evidence that shows it would recover fish populations. Salmon are already on the brink of extinction. Breaching takes a leap of faith that is not reasonable. Salmon recovery is a complex issue and there is no silver bullet that will work.

PGI supports turbine modifications, fish screens, spillway modification, fish ladder improvements and bypass improvements that will give salmon a better chance of reaching the ocean as juveniles and returning to spawn as adults. Further, PGI supports more funds for researching ocean and estuary conditions in order to uncover additional information on predators and the relationship between salmon and predators.

The proposal to breach the four lower Snake River dams and augment flows with water that belongs to Idaho's farm families will devastate our state's economy, virtually destroy our industry, unravel the social fabric of our people, and bankrupt already struggling farm families. That is an unacceptable price to pay for a plan that won't recover the salmon.

The Potato Growers of Idaho a non-profit organization representing 500 Idaho potato growers and their families support alternative 3 – Major System Improvements to help salmon populations recover. PGI opposes Alternative 4 – Dam Breaching. PGI also opposes continued flow augmentation.

General:

The draft Environmental Impact Statement is too narrowly focused. It asks the wrong questions. The question is not should dams be breached. But rather, how do we save salmon?

Dam Breaching would take years to accomplish, has tremendous costs associated with it, and is the most drastic option because there is no empirical data that shows it would recover fish populations. Even analysis by the National Marine Fisheries Service shows that no one alternative alone, including dam breaching can recover the salmon runs.

We oppose option 4, dam breaching and we don't believe removing dams is the answer. Fish survival through the hydropower system has improved to the point where the National Marine Fisheries Service has found that breaching alone, or increased in flow or spill regimes alone, cannot bring these fish runs back. Salmon recovery is a complex issue and there is no silver bullet that will work.

Salmon are already on the brink of extinction. It isn't reasonable to bet their survival on a single unproven theory. We need to look at what we know and what we don't know to build a recovery strategy that works. Breaching takes a leap of faith that is not reasonable.

There are 26 West Coast runs of salmon and steelhead that are listed as threatened or endangered. There are another eight, which are candidates for listing. Of these 34 runs, only four pass the lower Snake River dams. This problem is much broader than the dams. We need a solution that is more comprehensive than just destroying four dams.

Dam removal is described by some as a silver bullet, which alone will recover salmon runs. In fact, there is no silver bullet. We need to look at the entire life cycle of the salmon and find ways that will help.

New National Marine Fisheries Service data show that survival of the fish through each dam is 95 percent. Using current data, the difference between breaching and not breaching is as little as 2 percent over 48 to 100 years. Predator control, habitat improvement and harvest improvement can provide greater benefits more quickly than dam breaching.

Today, the National Marine Fisheries Service says smolt survival is as high as it was in the 1960s and 1970s before the dams were built. In that case, tearing out the dams isn't likely to provide any greater chance of survival.

Power:

The four dams in question produce 3,000 megawatts of power. That's enough to light 1.9 million homes, or all the homes in Idaho and Montana.

Northwest hydropower costs $10 per megawatt hour to produce compared to nuclear at $60 coal at $45, and natural gas at $30. Tearing out the dams could result in power costs per megawatt hour that are 6, 4.5, or 3 times higher than our current rates.

Use of hydropower in the Pacific Northwest keeps 28.3 metric tons of carbon dioxide out of our air by reducing the need for thermal generation. That is the same as taking 5.7 million cars off our roads. Why are we proposing replacing this clean energy with fossil fuels that will contribute to our air quality problems?

Hydropower is the nation's leading renewable resource. Of the renewable energy produced in this country, 90 percent comes from hydropower. Why are we considering destroying hydropower facilities and replacing them with fossil fuel or nuclear facilities?

Current estimates by Bonneville Power Administration are that we will need an additional 3,000 megawatts to meet regional electric needs during the winter months, with dams operating normally. If we remove the four dams and the power they are capable of producing, we might need 6,000 megawatts to heat homes during the winter. That power will be more

expensive than the hydropower currently in use and cannot be brought on line as quickly as hydropower.

Navigation:

Breaching these dams will destroy a river shipping system that will cost taxpayers $230 million to replace. It will cost 3,000 families their jobs and livelihood.

Barge transportation is fuel-efficient. One ton of commodities can move 524 miles by barge on one gallon of fuel, compared to 202 miles by rail and 59 miles by truck.

Barge transportation is the cleanest mode of transportation. It producers one-quarter to one-third of the emissions of rail and one-twentieth to one-ninth the emissions of trucking per ton.

60,000 tons of grain can be moved by a four to five barge tow. The same amount of grain would require 600 rail cars, or 2,400 semi trucks. This equals six miles of rail cars or 95 miles of trucks on the highway (with 150 feet between trucks).

Environmental Impacts of Breaching

Up to 75 million tons of sediment will wash down the Snake and Columbia Rivers if the four dams are breached. That will destroy salmon and resident species as well. Is it reasonable to take an action that puts our salmon runs at risk?

Replacing lost hydropower with natural gas turbines will put millions of tons of carbon dioxide into the air. Is it reasonable to endanger our health and that of our children by adding air pollution?

Flow velocities would increase and river depth will decrease. Contamination would concentrate within the river. Historically, water temperatures were higher in the river before the dams were built. Is it reasonable to take an action that in the end will harm the fish?

About 14,000 acres of land would be drained and exposed. This will have a short-term impact on wildlife and could result in increased erosion since there will be no plant life to stabilize these banks.

Irrigation

Idaho has supplied more than 10 million acre-feet of water flow augmentation in the past five years and it has resulted in no measurable benefit to salmon. Yet the draft EIS depends on results from the PATH computer program to justify destroying the four lower Snake River dams. PATH models all include flow augmentation from Idaho. Is it reasonable to base our actions on a computer model that shows results that do not match real data as the basis for breaching the four lower Snake River dams?

It has been suggested that more flow would help salmon recovery. However, taking an additional one million acre-feet of irrigation water for flow augmentation drys up more than 600,000 acres of productive farmland at an annual cost of $430 million and thousands of agricultural jobs.

Taking an additional million acre-feet of Idaho water means that many of Idaho's reservoirs in dry years would be empty up to 10 percent of the time. Is it reasonable to devastate our resident fisheries, wildlife habitat and recreational opportunities for an option like dam breaching that has no guarantee that it would recover salmon?

The net direct value to the economy of one-acre foot of water, when used for irrigation, is $40 to $70 per acre-foot. The 1994 flow augmentation program used 11 million acre-feet. Water used for flow augmentation is not available for irrigation use or power production. Is it reasonable to continue to use water for flow augmentation when there is no scientific proof that it helps salmon?

Solutions We Support:

Fish passage improvements for juvenile and adult salmon, such as turbine modifications, fish screens spillway modification, fish ladder improvements, and bypass improvements.

Changes in hatchery practices so that they more closely mimic nature.

More funds for research into ocean conditions and estuary conditions.

Relocate terns and cormorants so that they prey on fewer salmon smolts.

Develop partnerships with the local people in the programs such as the hatch box program currently being pursued by the Nez Perce and Sho-Ban Tribes in Lemhi County. This allows for more smolts going downstream and more returning adults.

Manage hatcheries to help recover naturally spawning populations of fish.

Reduce mixed stock fisheries, experiment with selective harvest methods.

Reduce or eliminate flow or spill requirements since there is no demonstrated benefit.

Reduce spill requirements in favor of surface collection bypass and in-river transport.

Research alternative fish recovery options such as improved guidance systems using strobe lights, improved screening methods, and artificial streams, which bypass reservoirs.

Conclusion:

Breaching dams is the most drastic option available. It can not happen in time to save endangered salmon runs. We must look at reasonable alternatives that help recover salmon quickly and we must not waste any more time, effort, or money pursuing the dam breaching option, which cannot happen in time to save salmon runs. Dam breaching is not the silver bullet. There is no silver bullet for salmon recovery.

The proposal to breach the four lower Snake River dams and augment flows with water that belongs to Idaho's farm families will devastate our state's economy, virtually destroy our industry, unravel the social fabric of our people, and bankrupt already struggling farm families. That is an unacceptable price to pay for a plan that won't recover the salmon.

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PRESS RELEASE
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